

# Meaningful Public Engagement Leads to Better Results



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We are in an era where public policy professionals are reframing how we think about public engagement. When members of the public don't engage in their outreach activities, professionals are looking inward at their own communications and engagement strategies. They are investing in improving these processes to engage better with those frequently –historically and presently – left out.

Meaningful public engagement goes beyond standard outreach; it has become a best practice. It means that the engagement is performed in a way that builds trust and relationships, ensures active participation from members of the most underserved communities affected by the project or plan, empowers the most typically underrepresented people, and results in tangible outcomes that reflect the vision and needs of those who were engaged. Meaningful

engagement treats underserved communities as partners in the planning process and is a critical element of most equity frameworks. Equity as a goal of public policy professionals is not just a trend but part of a powerful triple-bottom-line movement for a better, more resilient world.

## The History of Public Engagement

Throughout American history, entire demographics of people were outright barred from participating in decision-making processes until laws were passed to make such overt discrimination illegal. In contrast to discrimination in the past, we frequently find ourselves grappling today with the result of accepting ineffective and outdated engagement tactics, resulting in the perpetuation of low quality of life and reduced access to opportunities. Passive discrimination occurs today when people's different identities and life

situations are not considered in the development of a public engagement process. It also happens because there are remnants of discriminatory practices in policies and procedures that haven't been updated in decades. The good news is that there are identifiable ways to improve public engagement to reverse the harmful effects of past discriminatory policies.

The movement for social equity influenced the signing of U.S. Executive Order 13985 - *On Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government* in January 2021. In this Executive Order, public engagement is named as a key function of carrying out the order in Section 8.<sup>1</sup> Engagement with Members of Underserved Communities. This section notes that certain communities “*have been historically underrepresented in the Federal Government and underserved by, or subject to discrimination in, Federal policies and programs.*”

### How to Achieve Meaningful Public Engagement

Since the engagement of the past actively left people out, engagement of the present and future must actively bring people into the process. That is why the key to meaningful engagement is meeting people where they are, meaning physically going to where it is most convenient for a person to engage with you. For example, if you are working on a public transportation plan, you meet with people on buses. When working on a housing plan, you go to the most low-income neighborhoods and knock on doors. Meeting people where they are involves many considerations, including time of day, cultural competency, spoken language, and accessibility for people with differing abilities or disabilities.

Engagement involves active participation and ideally empowers individuals and groups on both sides of the interaction. When designing a public engagement activity, consider how to leverage a moment of interaction to provide and receive key information simultaneously. Keep in mind that while you may be an expert in the research, members of the public are experts in their lived experience – which is the data you need to craft the most effective policy possible. Like most specializations, if taking the time to improve the public engagement skills of the professionals within your organization is unrealistic in the short term, you could hire experts to assist you. Hiring consultants and experts

who employ grassroots strategies, rather than traditional outreach, is optimal.

Fortunately, we don't have to start from scratch to make public engagement processes more meaningful. Professionals can learn from grassroots community organizers whose organizations have been organizing and empowering workers and vulnerable communities for over a hundred years – and even hire those organizers directly. Demonstrating a commitment to meaningful engagement means investing in your engagement processes and programs. Quality of engagement is not quick or cheap, but it pays off tenfold when the public sees tangible benefits that reflect their real needs, building community trust and long-term planning and development partners.

### Housing Impact

Public engagement for housing policy and development is either required by law for specific processes like Comprehensive Plan and Consolidated Plan development, or implemented voluntarily to collect data or build public buy-in for housing programs and projects. The quality of the engagement in these processes, especially those that are mandated, varies considerably. A common perspective is that people only show up when they want to voice opposition, like the struggle against NIMBY opposition faced by affordable housing developers.

Elected officials are tasked with listening to their constituents and making community-informed, justifiable decisions. Harmful opposition can be neutralized and balanced by bringing the opportunity to weigh in directly to the people who typically go unheard yet are the most impacted by these policy decisions. If housing policy and development professionals can master the art of meaningful public engagement, the affordable housing landscape could be significantly improved.

<sup>1</sup> Accessible at: <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2021/01/25/2021-01753/advancing-racial-equity-and-support-for-underserved-communities-through-the-federal-government>.



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